Toward Student Autonomy in Reading: Reciprocal Teaching

By Gerry Hewitt

If, as instructors of reading, we want to teach our students to be active readers, reciprocal teaching (Palinscar and Brown 1984) gives students the required cognitive and metacognitive strategies to understand the reading process. Reciprocal teaching provides models and requires interaction and feedback to engage learners and reinforce comprehension in jointly reconstructing the meaning of text. Although Palinscar and Brown's original study involved seventh grade English speakers who were recognized as having poor comprehension skills, the reciprocal teaching protocol is applicable wherever readers are vulnerable to comprehension failure.

Palinscar and Brown selected four skill areas to activate and monitor reading comprehension: *(a) summarizing, (b)questioning, (c) clarifying, and (d) predicting*. They state:

By asking students to summarize a section of text, the teacher is requesting them to give attention to content. They are then asked to compose questions about that content in order to clarify meaning and engage in critical evaluation. Finally, the teacher asks the students to make predictions to involve them in drawing inferences. All four of these steps activate relevant background knowledge.

The Model

Reciprocal teaching is introduced as a strategy to improve student comprehension of the text while involving them in a verbal exchange of ideas. Students "reciprocate" their skills, experiences, and understanding as they follow the model.

The process begins with the instructor modeling the steps of reciprocal teaching. The instructor reads the text segment and summarizes the passage. Next the instructor asks the students a question to which the students respond orally. The students ask a question of the instructor about the text for the purpose of clarification, and finally the instructor and students predict what will occur next. The process is repeated by the instructor until students are familiar with the sequence of activities and the skills involved. A student then performs the modeling role in either a large group or in small groups or pairs with the instructor acting as "coach," ultimately withdrawing from the process.

Reflections on the Model

The primary benefit of this reading strategy is that comprehension is likely to increase (Palinscar and Brown 1984, 1987, Gilroy and Moore 1986), but there are a number of other advantages.

1. Initially, while the instructor is responsible for summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting, students are able to observe and question the skills performed by an "expert." This allows the instructor to explain how the skills originate in the reading experience. In this way, both cognitive and metacognitive awareness of reading comprehension are attended to. Through reciprocal teaching learners become aware of their "cognitive resources" and their "self regulatory mechanism" which they use in their efforts to understand what they read. "What a reader knows about the task of reading will influence how s/he sets about controlling reading activities." (Brown 1982:42)
2. Students practice four basic reading skills and test their ideas against those of their peers. At the same time, they are listening and speaking in English in an authentic academic setting. They employ interactive techniques that are linguistically appropriate (interrupting gambits, question formation, opinion statements, agreement/disagreement phrases) and socially appropriate (taking turns, interpreting body language, and sharing responsibility).
3. Students' vocabulary needs are contextualized and clarified, and opportunities exist for using relevant vocabulary during discussion of the text.
4. The reader's independence from the classroom teacher encourages autonomy in the reading process.
5. A video of students engaged in reciprocal teaching provides data for the analysis of reading skills and group dynamics.
6. Skills are transferable to the reading of texts across the disciplines.
7. The reciprocal teaching reading group forms a natural study group.

Cautionary notes include:

1. Used too often, the procedure, may becoming routine and boring.
2. The possibility of misinformation being given during student discussions increases the need for monitoring and intervention by the teacher.
3. The model requires competency in decoding.

Conclusion

As a reading instructor, I find the reciprocal teaching model attractive for its simplicity of form and success in realizing its goals. Feedback from my ESL students indicates that they share my enthusiasm because reciprocal teaching is easy to follow, reinforces skills that are basic to reading successfully in English, and provides a forum for the integration of communicative activities. Its potential for multilevel and cross-discipline application makes this model a valuable teaching tool in the ESL classroom.

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References

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